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DfE was aware of bootcamps gender issue but has plans to tackle it



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FE WHITE PAPER WEBCAST... IN CONVERSATION WITH KEITH SMITH

Intervention regime WILL include college failure to comply with local skills plans

BILLY CAMDEN
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Exclusive

New legislation will enable the education secretary to intervene where colleges refuse to deliver courses decided through local skills improvement plans, the FE white paper's architect has confirmed.

But the extent of the powers is still being determined by ministers and there is currently no timeline for when the formal regulations will come into force.

Keith Smith, the director for post-16 strategy at the Department for Education, clarified the intent behind the legislation put forward in the white paper during an FE Week webcast on Tuesday.

Central to the reforms are new local skills improvement plans, which will be "led" by employers and "shape technical skills provision so that it meets local labour market skills needs".

As part of this, "new accountability structures to underpin" the plans will be introduced, including legislation "to put the employer leadership on a statutory footing".

"New powers" that allow the education secretary to intervene "where local providers are consistently unable to deliver the skills priorities for that area" will also be introduced.

There has been confusion about what this new power would mean in practice since the white paper was published in January, and whether it meant that the DfE's intervention regime would in the future include college failure to comply with the local skills plans.

Smith confirmed this was the case during this week's webcast.

"This will be for ministers to set out, which they haven't yet done, but the intent will be



to have a bit of the FE Bill about how we get employers involved in shaping the system. The other part will be about what do the secretary of state's powers look like where the system is perhaps not working effectively as he or she would like," he said.

FE Week editor Nick Linford, who chaired the webcast, pressed Smith to be clear that this legislation would give the education secretary more power to intervene where a college or training provider isn't delivering the courses as laid out in the skills plan.

Smith confirmed there will be a "shift in the ability for the secretary of state to intervene where he or she doesn't feel that the system is effective".

"The legislative agenda is a really critical part of the strategy, but I should just caveat all this to say government has not yet laid its formal regulations in the House of Commons and so this is very much for ministers to determine to what extent what sort of articles they want to lay within the Bill," he added.

College autonomy in deciding what courses

they run has been a hot topic in recent years.

At the Association of Colleges conference in 2018, Ofsted chief inspector Amanda Spielman controversially argued that some colleges choose to run courses for financial gain, such as in performing arts, despite the lack of opportunity for progression.

This, she said, is giving students "false hope" by putting them on courses where there are slim job prospects. Spielman repeated this concern in the watchdog's 2020 annual report last January.

There have since been a number of reports from the likes of the AoC and former adviser to the skills minister and founder of the think tank EDSK Tom Richmond that suggest colleges should lose some autonomy.

And in November, Education and Skills Funding Agency director Matthew Atkinson told MPs he would "definitely like more power" to intervene in the running of colleges.

The local skills improvement plans mooted in the white paper are set to be piloted this year.

FE WHITE PAPER WEBCAST... IN CONVERSATION WITH KEITH SMITH

Skills bootcamps 'counter-intuitive' to long-term FE simplification

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Exclusive

Pilot schemes, such as skills bootcamps, are “counter-intuitive” to the Department for Education’s long-term goal of simplifying the FE system, Keith Smith has admitted.

The director for post-16 strategy at the DfE and mastermind behind the FE white paper conceded that introducing programmes with brand-new funding rules and methodologies do add further complexity to an already complicated system.

But he explained that schemes like this needed to be ramped up quickly to help the country’s recovery from Covid-19 and asked the sector: “Please don’t take anything that happens in the short-term as any sort of indication of where the future intent will be.”

Skills bootcamps are currently being piloted and are set for a £43 million national launch later this year. They are part of the prime minister’s “lifetime skills guarantee” and plan to get people quickly back into jobs following the pandemic.

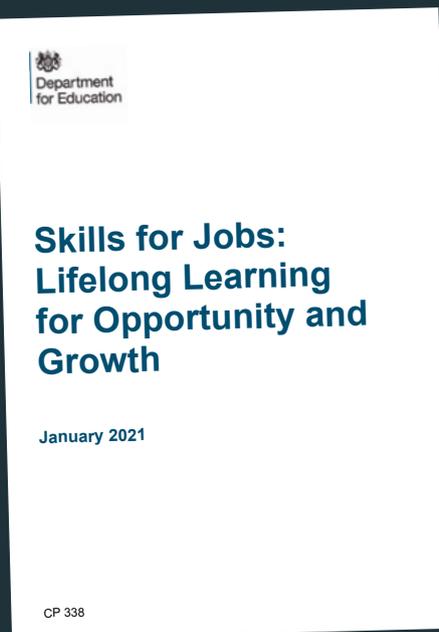
They offer learners aged 19 and over the chance to take a 12-to-16-week level 3 or higher course with a guaranteed job interview at the end.

But as previously reported by FE Week, the new courses involve a totally new funding formula, with providers receiving 30 per cent to start the learner, 60 per cent

for achievement and then ten per cent for eligible progression.

Providers also do not record learners through the individualised learner record and there are currently no plans for Ofsted to inspect the provision.

This is despite the DfE pledging in its FE white paper to “reform our funding



and accountability system” of which “simplification and streamlining of funding” would be central.

Following this week’s Budget, Association of Colleges chief executive David Hughes said the job schemes that have been created or scaled-up to aid the country’s Covid-19 recovery, such as Kickstart, bootcamps and traineeships, need to be “aligned and funding simplified”.

“The programmes currently do not work well together, are confusing to employers and will not work effectively for many unemployed people,” he added.

“The key thing now is to join up jobs and skills initiatives to allow as many people as possible to benefit from them quickly.”

Quizzed during an FE Week webcast on the white paper this week about why the government appeared to start from scratch when designing bootcamps, Smith agreed they could cause more confusion for the sector.

He said: “Yeah, I can see that. There is always a balance in the short term about getting money into the system in a way that is being provided for. In this case, government is really keen to test it [bootcamps].”

“I completely accept the challenge that some of this is going to feel a bit counter-intuitive in the short term, that we’re perhaps doing things that potentially aren’t necessarily always in keeping with the longer term.

“All I would say is that I completely recognise that. Those listening today will understand there is a lot of complexity here we need to sort out. So please don’t take anything that happens in the short term as any sort of indication of where the future intent will be.”

He added that the white paper’s promised funding and accountability consultation “really will be the place that we start to mock all this up”.

The consultation is expected to launch later this year.

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Budget: What the chancellor announced for FE

BILLY CAMDEN

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From front

Chancellor Rishi Sunak delivered his spring Budget this week and confirmed a number of new investments for the FE and skills sector.

They include a doubling of apprentice incentive payments for employers, a further boost to traineeships and a new Help To Grow scheme for small businesses to upskill.

FE Week has the key points:

1 CASH INCENTIVES FOR EMPLOYERS TO HIRE NEW APPRENTICES DOUBLED

Apprenticeship financial incentives were first introduced by Sunak in August and currently offer firms £2,000 to take on apprentices aged 16 to 24, while those that employ new apprentices aged 25 and over are paid £1,500.

The chancellor said that the bonuses, set to end this month, will be extended for a further six months to September.

And any employers who hire a new apprentice between April 1, 2021 and September 30, 2021 will receive £3,000 per new hire, regardless of the apprentice's age.

This is on top of the £1,000 payment already provided for new apprentices aged 16 to 18 and those under 25 with an education, health and care plan, meaning that some employers could receive £4,000 in total.



2 £126M FOR TRAINEESHIPS

The government will provide an additional £126 million in England for "high-quality" work placements and training for 16- to 24-year-olds in the 2021/22 academic year.

This is hoped to attract a further 40,000 traineeship starts next year. Employers who provide trainees with work experience will



continue to be funded at a rate of £1,000 per trainee.

It builds on the £111 million the chancellor set aside in 2020/21 to triple the number of traineeships.

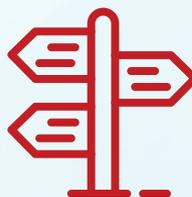
3 'PORTABLE' APPRENTICESHIPS SET TO BE LAUNCHED

The government will introduce a £7 million fund from July 2021 to "help employers in England set up and expand portable apprenticeships".

The budget document says this will enable people who need to work across multiple projects with different employers, such as in the TV and film industries, to "benefit from the high-quality long-term training that an apprenticeship provides".

Employers will be "invited to bring forward proposals here, and in particular the Creative Industries Council will be asked to do so in recognition of the potential benefits of this new approach for the creative sector".

Trailed last Friday, the Treasury called this scheme "flexi-job" apprenticeships. The first



of these are expected to start in January 2022.

4 'HELP TO GROW' SCHEME FOR SMES TO UPSKILL

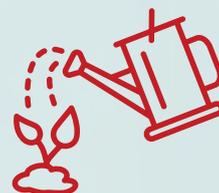
The budget document says the government will offer a new UK-wide management programme to upskill 30,000 small and medium-sized enterprises over three years.

It states: "Developed in partnership with industry, the programme will combine a national curriculum delivered through business schools with practical case studies and mentoring from experienced business professionals.

"Over 12 weeks, and 90 per cent subsidised by government, this programme will equip SMEs with the tools to grow their businesses and thrive."

The budget's costing document shows the government has set aside £60 million for this scheme in 2021/22 and then £75 million for 2022/23.

It is unclear at this stage what government department will be responsible for this scheme.



'Flexi-job' apprenticeships: What are they and how will they work?

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Several industries where project-based employment is the norm have struggled more than most to comply with the 12-month minimum apprenticeship rule, but their fortunes could be about to change.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak announced in the Budget on Wednesday a £7 million fund to run so-called "portable" or "flexi-job" apprenticeships in sectors such as creative and construction.

This "new approach" will involve organisations applying for money to start new agencies which employ apprentices and place them with multiple employers.

It is targeted at those industries that cannot offer a long-enough placement with a single employer for apprentices to meet the government's minimum 12-month duration requirement. In the TV and film sector, for example, most roles are freelance and usually only run for two to three months.

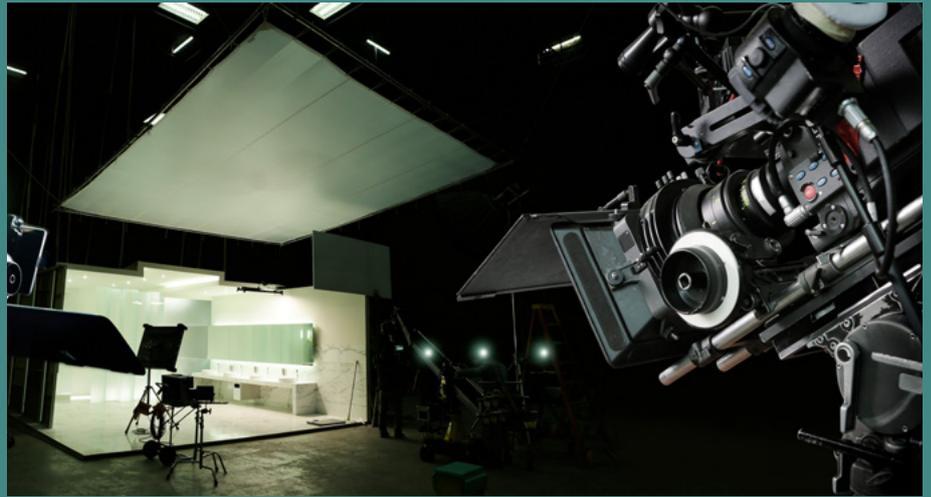
The flexi-job model was lauded by prime minister Boris Johnson during a speech on adult skills last year, after a meeting between ministers and his influential skills advisor Professor Alison Wolf decided the government should press ahead with its introduction. It also featured briefly in this year's FE white paper.

The scheme will become the third agency-type model for apprenticeships, following Apprenticeship Training Agencies (ATAs) and Group Training Associations (GTAs), which have been established for many years but have arguably become neglected by policymakers.

The Department for Education, which is responsible for the scheme, has promised a consultation on the proposals.

Levy problems 'particularly stark' for creative industries

Flexi-job apprenticeships are being specifically targeted at industries where work is often patchy. Workers in the creative sector, for example, who are finishing off



one high-end television show will often wait weeks before starting on a big-budget blockbuster, for instance.

As Mark Heholt, head of policy for representative body ScreenSkills, told FE Week, the problems the creative sector faces are "not unique, but it is particularly stark".

About 50 per cent of screen sector workers – in film, TV, visual special effects, animation, games – are freelancers, and it is only "if you're lucky that your jobs will join up, whereas when you're an apprentice, you have to have a minimum 12-month contract with one employer. So, you can't move around.

"If you were training to be a set builder, after you've built it you'd then have nothing to do until it's time to take it back down again."

This issue has led to the creative sector seriously underspending its apprenticeship levy. The Creative Industries Council (CIC), a representative body chaired by the culture and business secretaries and BBC director-general Tim Davie, estimates that out of a £70 million levy pot for the creative industries every year, about 20 per cent is used.

Both ScreenSkills and CIC are working closely with the government on the development of flexi-job apprenticeships.

Ian Woodcroft, policy and government relations manager for the construction training organisation CITB, told FE Week his organisation had not been "directly involved"

with discussions around the flexi-job scheme, but is "keen to understand more of the detail" around it, as they look to tackle similar problems. CITB runs its own shared apprenticeship scheme which has supported 300 apprentices so far.

To their credit, the government has recognised the problem and is acting to help these sectors utilise apprenticeships more easily.

The Skills for Jobs white paper, published in January, acknowledged that creative and construction face "barriers in making full use of apprenticeships," due to their "varied and flexible employment patterns".

It added that "sectoral apprenticeship agencies may offer one solution, giving constant employment to an individual during the life of their apprenticeship which allows them to move between work placements and continue their training".

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is also running a £100,000 pilot programme with ScreenSkills, Netflix and Warner Bros, which was launched in 2019.

The programme was halted by Covid-19 and is waiting for productions to start up again before resuming, but will involve training apprentices as broadcast

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production assistants and production accountants with placements at those two companies, which are match funding with their levy money.

Prime minister Boris Johnson, in his landmark speech on adult skills at Exeter College last September, said the government wanted to make more apprenticeships portable "so you can take them from company to company".

FE Week understands, shortly before Johnson's speech, Alison Wolf met with skills minister Gillian Keegan and DCMS' digital skills minister Caroline Dinenage and decided that flexi-jobs – rather than other options, such as bulk transferring levy funds, or modular apprenticeships – would be the course of action.

Shortly afterwards, the spending review in November confirmed that during 2021-22, the government would "test approaches to supporting apprenticeships in industries with more flexible working patterns".

How flexi-job apprenticeships will help

Although the Treasury has said employers will be expected to come forward and bid to set up the flexi-job agencies, Heholt expects it will be organisations like sector bodies and training providers instead.

ScreenSkills is itself planning to apply, and Heholt says it will be "critical the agency which employs the apprentices has a background and ability and the skill to look after them, to provide them with all the pastoral care, and all the rest of it.

"It also needs to have very good relationships and contacts with industry, so that it can arrange these multiple placements."

The number of employers involved in each agency will "depend," he says, on the role for which the apprentice is training.

If it is a set builder role, they may need five or six; if it's a production accountant, with larger chunks of work, it may be only two.

The new agencies, he said, "will need to make sure they understand the kinds of roles, the typical duration of those roles. And therefore, how many placements the apprentice needs over the duration of the apprenticeship."

Neil Hatton, chair of the CIC's



Mark Heholt

apprenticeship working group, believes there will be a rotating cast of employers: "You could easily get 20 or 30 employers and that may be a rotating 20 or 30."

As well as scrapping the single employer precedent, the flexi-job apprentices will not be offered a job at the end of the programme, according to ScreenSkills and CIC – again due to the freelance nature of creative workers.

Hatton said, though: "If people come out at the end of the course and they've done well, they are going to be in demand."

Ditching so many tenets of the reformed apprenticeship programme are likely to have implications for how providers report their delivery to the DfE.

When asked what the new scheme will mean for training providers, the department would only say it would consult on how "agency models can better support apprentices to complete their apprenticeships through a series of placements with employers".

Reporting could be easier for providers under this model, reckons Heholt, as they will be dealing with one agency rather than any number of employers.

What about apprenticeship training agencies?

So far, much of what has been announced about these new flexi-job apprenticeships and their agencies sounds markedly similar to the pre-existing ATA and GTA models.

ATAs, which launched in 2009, employ apprentices

and place them with a host employer, so the firms do not have to recruit an apprentice themselves.

GTAs, which started in the 1960s, are set up and governed by local employers who may not have enough resources on their own to train apprentices; so they club together to set up what Jon Graham, chief executive of group training association JTL, calls an "in-house training business".

"The apprentice will be employed by the employer, but they send them to the GTA, and the employer will have some strategic direction as to what the training organisation does, and how they operate."

The new flexi-jobs apprenticeship agencies model has provoked some bemusement from the GTA and ATA sectors. The DfE has even described the DCMS-ScreenSkills pilot as an "apprenticeship training agency model".

Speaking to FE Week, Iain Elliott, who operates both an ATA and a GTA in Humber, asked: "Why not use the structure that exists?" He warned the government to not "reinvent the wheel".

The Department for Education has said it "values the role good-quality ATAs and GTAs play in helping apprentices and employers access apprenticeships" and "wants to build on the success of existing models".

But the creative sector has its own reasons why ATAs and GTAs have not been directly adopted.

Mark Heholt said ScreenSkills looked into the ATA model for the pilot, but found "there are none, which I'm aware of, which arrange multiple placements, over the course of the apprenticeship, which is where the all the cost and the complexity comes from".

This is backed up by Elliott and Graham, with the latter saying they have occasionally used multiple employers informally where an apprentice's "range of work might change" so they are suddenly working on one task such as cabling "and also need to do a bit of x, y, and z".

Hatton has also said the creative sector does not have many ATAs, so there is not that existing infrastructure to work from, and he was unsure how ATAs could cope with the periods of little to no work in his sector.

The first flexi-job apprenticeships are expected to start in January 2022, with bids to the £7 million fund opening in July 2021.



Boris Johnson

Ed sec defends independent provider Covid-19 testing 'madness'

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Exclusive

The education secretary has defended the controversial delay in distributing Covid-19 testing kits to independent training providers.

In an interview with FE Week, Gavin Williamson insisted that the providers have "not been left out".

He said they can tap into the current local community testing regime until the supplies are made available to them through a "demand-led model" being developed by the Department for Education.

But he failed to explain why this process will not be up and running until the end of March – weeks after learners return to onsite teaching.

Williamson's comments have been met with more anger from "livid" private providers, with one saying they tried to order 1,000 testing kits through an emergency line recommended by DfE but were allocated just ten.

The testing delay, described by the Association of Employment and Learning Providers as "madness", has proven particularly controversial as colleges are receiving the kits ahead of a return to face-to-face training on March 8.

Guidance from the Department for Education states that it "expects" every 16-to-19 student will "attend their FE provider in person and will undertake the majority of their planned hours on site" from that date.

Private providers have warned that reopening without access to testing constitutes a "significant risk" and some fear they will now have to delay course starts as a result.



The DfE is yet to provide an explanation for why its "bespoke solution" for independent providers to order the kits is not yet available, or how it will work.

Asked who was to blame for this oversight, Williamson told FE Week: "As you can imagine, the range of independent training providers is extensive, and this is why we're rolling out testing much more broadly.

"All independent training providers are able to benefit through the community testing regime, so they've not been left out. They're actually able to tap into that resource straight away."

He continued: "What we're doing is we're massively expanding our testing regime and taking off some of the burdens of those independent training providers, but they already have access to testing through community, local authority testing schemes and we really would encourage them to do that. But as part of our big expansion, they're going to be included in what we're

doing as well."

Jon Graham, chief executive of training provider JTL, described the situation as "such a shameful and immoral thing". His provider trains around 8,000 learners, mostly in plumbing, electrical and engineering apprenticeships across 12 different sites in England.

JTL previously received a text from the Department of Health and Social Care saying JTL was eligible for free Covid-19 test kits, but when the provider tried to order 1,000 last week, they were only offered ten.

"Why is it that a college over the road gets all their 16-to-18-year-olds in safely with testing but for thousands of our learners I've got to choose ten of them to get a test?" Graham said.

"Apprentices are also moving around different sites and offices. If you are an electrician or plumber, you're going into people's homes and they could be vulnerable people and you might be asymptomatic – I've not been able to test them."

As Williamson said, private providers are encouraged in the DfE's operational guidance for reopening to use local asymptomatic testing sites until their kits arrive in April.

But as FE Week reported last week, not every local authority has one, and most are not easily accessible by public transport for students.

In the absence of testing, the DfE says providers can help ensure the safety of students and staff and minimise the risk of outbreaks by implementing their recommended "system of controls".

This includes ensuring face coverings are worn as well as other personal protective equipment where appropriate, promoting the "catch it, bin it, kill it" approach, keeping occupied spaces well ventilated and maintaining social distancing.

‘I will back you all the way,’ Williamson says to teachers

FREDDIE WHITTAKER
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Exclusive

The education secretary has pledged to back teachers “all the way” in their efforts to award GCSE and A-level grades this summer, and accepted he will share the responsibility if there is a backlash on results days.

In an exclusive interview with FE Week’s sister title Schools Week, Gavin Williamson said the government was putting its “confidence and faith in teacher judgment” and said a “robust appeals structure” would help deal with potential “challenges” with the system.

Exams have been cancelled this year following the decision to partially close schools and colleges in January. The government last week confirmed its plans to base grades on teacher assessments, prompting fears teachers could be left to shoulder the blame if there is another upset this year.

The government was forced into a last-minute U-turn last year on its decision to award grades based on centre assessments adjusted by computer algorithm.

Ministers have ruled out using an algorithm this summer, but there are concerns that relying on teacher assessment will lead to disparities between schools, colleges and grade inflation.

Williamson said the government was “absolutely supporting teachers” and pointed to plans to publish guidance to help with grading and for exam boards to provide additional support.

“It’s why we’ll be putting both the internal quality assurance and external quality assurance [in place] and absolutely backing teachers all the way on this,” he said.

“We want to make sure this works and, of

course, everyone has a responsibility for the structures that have been put in place and, of course, myself included in that.”

However, the education secretary said the government would take a “very serious view” of malpractice. Exam boards are to look for this when they conduct the external quality assurance process, including via checks that will be triggered where schools and colleges have previously received sanctions for malpractice.

“People do have to have responsibility for what they’re putting forward and that’s why we’ve put those checks and balances in place,” he said.

“We’d expect everyone to adhere to the high professional standards that we always see within the teaching profession. But where there are things that aren’t quite right we will absolutely take action in order to be able to deal with that.”

Schools and colleges are due to reopen more widely from next week, with providers allowed to phase the return to facilitate requirements for mass testing.

However, the decision to bring all students back in the same week has prompted fears of a return to the situation seen last autumn, when schools and colleges were

regularly forced to send large groups of students home because of a confirmed Covid case.

Williamson said he accepted that there “will be children and there will be teachers who will have to isolate, but that’s exactly as you would expect as we are still dealing with a pandemic”.

But he said the number of children having to isolate “fell dramatically over the first four weeks of full return in September, and we’d hope to keep a similar sort of level of practice there”.

Williamson said the country had made a “difficult sacrifice to not bring other parts of the country back before schools and colleges” in order to “safeguard education”.

“Anyone who understands what’s best for a child recognises that actually they learn best and they are in the best possible position to succeed by getting them back into the classroom.

“That’s where our focus has been and we’ve taken a decision not to bring anything else back other than children into the classroom because we’ve always said it’s our national priority to get children back into class.”



Gavin Williamson

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DfE was aware of bootcamps gender issue but has plans to tackle it

FRASER WHIELDON
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Exclusive

The Department for Education knew its flagship skills bootcamps could be flooded with male learners but has a raft of plans to tackle the issue, FE Week has learned.

An equalities impact assessment of the programme received by this newspaper under the Freedom of Information Act makes a series of recommendations to bring in more female and ethnic minority learners.

These include a targeted marketing campaign "to attract a diverse cohort" of learners to the programmes.

Also, to run monthly workshops with local authorities to "discuss the cohort the courses are attracting and share best practice on how to improve this," the document reads.

The assessment warns the bootcamps – level 3 and above engineering, manufacturing and digital skills courses being launched with the National Skills Fund in April – "may require prior knowledge or experience in male-dominated career areas".

FE Week published exclusive analysis in January which found the DfE is seeking a very narrow range of digital, engineering and construction-related courses, mostly studied by men, for bootcamps. For example, less than 20 per cent of level 3 IT courses were studied by women last year.

This was echoed in the DfE's equalities impact assessment, in which data from the Office for National Statistics was quoted showing just 16.5 per cent of employees in the IT sector are women.

The assessment admits that this "may result in a disproportionate number of men being able to access the courses".

The first bootcamps launched as an £8 million series of pilots last year in areas such as Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, and Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire.

A number of them have reported a high amount of uptake among female learners, yet quite poor take-up by black, Asian and minority



ethnic (BAME) learners in some areas.

The DfE published in January two tenders worth a total of £36 million for skills bootcamps to start in April: one for digital skills courses in nine areas, and another for a number in areas such as digital skills, electrotechnical, nuclear or green energy at a local or national level.

Prime minister Boris Johnson pushed the opportunity provided by the bootcamps for older learners during a speech last year, promising they will mean "you can learn IT, whatever your age".

The bootcamps' "service requirement" tender said the DfE wanted suppliers to have a minimum of 50 per cent female learners.

But Association of Colleges chief executive David Hughes warned "it is very unlikely" the bootcamps will meet that target.

To ensure it does, the DfE's assessment includes a string of actions, including collecting data on learners "to ensure the bootcamps are attracting a diverse cohort".

For the bootcamp pilots, a DfE spokesperson said they are "collating data on both applicants to the bootcamps and participants on the bootcamps through monthly provider returns," which include participants' gender, disability or long-term health condition and ethnicity.

As the bootcamps are not using individualised learner records, the DfE has a spreadsheet that providers fill in. They do not plan to change this for the first phase of bootcamps, they said.

The assessment also calls for bootcamp

advertising to use positive role models and feature a "diverse range" of people, including women, disabled people and those from different ethnic backgrounds.

Ensuring recruitment practices take account of unconscious bias and processes for learners who complain of unfair practices or treatment is also recommended to providers.

The DfE spokesperson said they want "everyone" to benefit from the bootcamps and the government "shares an ambition with employers to increase diversity".

When it comes to encouraging female learners, the pilot programmes have seen some promising results.

West Midlands Combined Authority has seen 1,500 starts on its bootcamp pilots, which started in the first wave and include dedicated digital skills training for women and other groups who are under-represented in technology.

Of the pilot's learners, 51 per cent have been female while 53 per cent have been non-white.

Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, which has been running courses in digital marketing, cyber security and data engineering as part of the second wave of pilots, currently has 310 learners on programme and 48 per cent are female.

D2N2 local enterprise partnership, another second wave pilot provider, has seen 408 starts on programmes in network routers and switches, digital sales, and coding and software development – 51 per cent of which were female.

But just 11 per cent of Liverpool's learners are from a BAME background, while multi-ethnic, Asian, black and other ethnic groups make up just ten per cent of D2N2's learners.

The combined authority said that although this is "not a KPI for our pilot, we are actively promoting across a diverse range of platforms and stakeholders as we want as many people from all backgrounds to be able to access the opportunity the project offers".

Subcontracting cap set at 25% from 2022

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The volume of subcontracted training will be capped at 25 per cent for providers from next year – but plans for a further phased reduction beyond this amount have been binned.

However, providers will be allowed to submit a request to be exempt from the cap.

Further details about reforms to FE subcontracting were published this week by the Education and Skills Funding Agency following its consultation outcome published in June.

Many of the measures have stayed the same, but there are some important clarifications.

The most significant for providers will be the ESFA's decision to introduce a straight 25 per cent cap on subcontracted provision from 2022/23.

The agency's consultation had proposed that the cap should be further reduced to 17.5 per cent in the following year and then to ten per cent the year after.

But most respondents disagreed with the proposal and the agency then set off to further evaluate the "right threshold".

The updated guidance said: "By 2022 to 2023, we do not expect any provider (excluding local authorities and European Social Fund provision) to be subcontracting 25 per cent or more of their provision unless they have written permission from us to do so."

There is no further detail about which providers would qualify to be exempt from



Eileen Milner

the cap.

The ESFA previously asked all providers to produce a plan during the 2020 autumn term setting out how they will achieve a reduction in their volume of subcontracted activity over the next three academic years

For providers who are currently subcontracting 25 per cent or more of their provision, the ESFA said it will conduct a "targeted exercise, writing to providers to request a copy of their reduction plan (if we do not receive an exemption case) to inform the progress that providers have made in their plans for a reduction across the three years".

Another key change announced this week is that adult education courses have been removed from the agency's proposal for prior approval for whole programme subcontracting.

The ESFA's consultation had proposed to introduce "stricter controls on the circumstances in which the whole of a learner's programme could be subcontracted, and providers will

be required to obtain agreement from the ESFA before doing so".

This rule will now only be introduced for students whose whole programme of 16-to-19 provision is subcontracted from 2021/22.

The agency said it concluded that introducing "such a requirement for adult education budget programmes above a specified length is not practical and we will not be proceeding with this".

ESFA chief executive Eileen Milner embarked on a major review of subcontracting in 2019, expressing concerns about the "continued rise" in cases of fraud linked to subcontracting arrangements managed by agency.

The ESFA has since announced a series of measures it will take to "significantly" reduce subcontracting in FE over the next three years.

In publishing the additional detail about the measures, the agency made clear they are not "prohibiting or banning" all subcontracting.

"Where it is done well, for the right reasons, and properly overseen, it can enhance the learner experience and add value," they added.

Association of Employment and Learning Providers chief policy officer Simon Ashworth welcomed the changes.

"The adult education budget not being included in the whole programme subcontracting proposal is a commonsense approach," he said.

"Jointly delivering qualifications and joint delivery of training programmes are two very different beasts, and the exclusion should be welcomed.

"On the cap, we've moved away from the blunt and arbitrary phased reduction over three years as first mooted, which is a positive change. The ESFA is now proposing a threshold of 25 per cent, but it will helpfully allow providers to submit for an exemption."



Simon Ashworth

Colleges and training providers in line for £35 million slice of the Turing scheme

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Exclusive

Around one-third of the funding pot set aside for the Turing scheme will go to further education providers, FE Week can reveal.

A total of £105 million has been promised to pay for 35,000 placements for the UK's new international student exchange programme, which is set to get under way in September.

In an interview with FE Week, Ecorys, the co-delivery partner with the British Council for the Turing scheme, revealed that £35 million will go to further education, £60 million will go to universities and £10 million to schools.

This roughly equates to about 10,000 further education placements, 20,000 higher education placements and 5,000 school placements.

The scheme, named after scientist Alan



Turing, was unveiled in December as the replacement to the UK's participation in Erasmus+ following Brexit.

It will allow students to study and work abroad on placements ranging from two weeks to 12 months.

Bids for a slice of the funding are set to launch this month and the Department for Education plans to issue funding decisions in July.

A new Turing scheme programme guide published on Wednesday provides detail of how the funding will work.

FE providers will get £315 per participant in "organisational support" for the first 100 participants, and £180 for groups bigger than that.

For travel costs, they will receive a fixed amount depending how far away the destination is. For sending learners anywhere between 100km to 499km away it is £165 – while visiting Tanzania, for instance, at 11,000km, would qualify for £905.

Learners will also get £135 each to access

language resources if they are going away to a non-English-speaking country for more than 19 days.

Thereafter, daily funds will depend on whether the learner and accompanying staff member is in a group 1, 2 or 3 destination country, which is ranked according to local living costs.

Learners in group 1 countries get £109 a day for two weeks, and £76 a day after that. Those in group 2 countries get £94 a day then £66 a day, and those in group 3 countries get £80 a day and £56 a day after that.

Meanwhile, FE providers need to identify the "anticipated points of expenditure" when they will require the funds. They will be paid 80 per cent of costs at these points, with the final 20 per cent once a special report is completed showing that all went to plan.

FE providers will also need to undergo "financial capacity checks" before their application is accepted.

Read more about the upcoming Turing Scheme on pages 25-27.



Alan Turing

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Mobile providers broaden free data offer to include FE students

BILLY CAMDEN
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Telecoms companies have extended their free data offer to young and disadvantaged students in further education just as they are about to return for face-to-face teaching.

It was announced by the government on Wednesday that mobile providers including EE, Lycamobile, Sky Mobile, Tesco Mobile, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, Vodafone and iD Mobile have all agreed to widen the offer beyond school-aged children.

The extension will now apply to students aged 16 to 19 and those aged 19 to 25 with an education, health and care plan.

In its weekly update, the Education and Skills Funding Agency said: "During the Covid-19 outbreak a number of mobile network operators are offering free data for financially disadvantaged families who do not

have broadband at home and rely on mobile data to access the internet to help children participate in education remotely.

"Although, from March 8, the majority of students will be expected to return to onsite education, this offer may continue to be important for students who, for example, need to self-isolate or shield during this period."

This means that FE providers who have registered with the government's Get Help With Technology Service will be able to request free data for financially disadvantaged students who: do not have fixed broadband at home; cannot afford additional data for their devices; are experiencing disruption to face-to-face education.

The free data scheme was made available to school students in November to help them learn remotely during the national lockdown and is currently set to end in July.

Requests for free data must be made by someone in an FE provider who has been

"nominated to order devices through the Get Help with Technology Service", the ESFA said.

"Providers will need to submit students' mobile information through our online service."

The agency added that if increasing mobile data is not a suitable option for some young people, or if a request for additional data is unsuccessful, FE providers can also request 4G wireless routers.

And when providers request support, the Department for Education will "seek confirmation about how you have identified the number of disadvantaged students without broadband at home, who are experiencing disruption to their onsite education, through, for example, contact with students/parents and/or surveys.

"In providing evidence of need you should not include any personal information about the students, such as their names, addresses or date of birth."



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FE providers to receive free batch of face masks to aid reopening

BILLY CAMDEN
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All FE providers will receive up to 7,500 face masks from the government for free as they reopen to more students from next week.

A key new recommendation for onsite teaching from March 8 is for all students and staff to wear face coverings in the classroom until at least Easter.

Under Department for Education guidance, officials "expect" every 16-to-19 student will "attend their FE provider in person and will undertake the majority of their planned hours on site". Adult learners will also return but a more flexible mix of remote learning can be used for them.

To support the return of onsite education



and to ensure "maximum compliance with the system of controls", the Department of Health and Social Care is distributing

Type IIR disposable medical masks to FE providers.

Announcing the move this week, the Education and Skills Funding Agency said this supply is for "use only as the settings' contingency stock of face coverings".

FE providers should expect to receive a delivery of between 5,000 and 7,500 units by the end of the week commencing 8 March and be "sufficient to cover your contingency stock until the Easter, with larger settings receiving further stock if required".

For any queries on delivery or missing items, providers are told to contact the DHSC PPE helpline on 0800 876 6802, identifying as an education setting, or email dfeppequeries@unipart.com



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For an initial confidential discussion please contact John Rees, Principal and Chief Executive, on 01422 399303 or email Liz.smith@calderdale.ac.uk

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Informal discussion:

Karen Robson,
Head of HE and Professional
krobson@yorkcollege.ac.uk,

Alison Davis, Head of Health, Care and Education
adavis@yorkcollege.ac.uk.

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Feature

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‘The Turing scheme has big boots to fill’

JESS STAUFENBERG
@STAUFENBERGJ

The Turing scheme will open for applications this month. We surveyed a number of sector professionals to compare the newcomer with its predecessor, Erasmus+ and to ponder the likely outcomes for students and staff

For those colleges that made use of the Erasmus+ scheme during its 25-year lifespan in the UK, Brexit in January last year started the clock on a nerve-shredding countdown. Would the government keep us in the European Union’s £13-billion-pound support programme? Would they replace it with something else? Partner colleges across the continent fired off emails to their colleagues in England, who were unable to give an answer.

Just like the Brexit deal itself, the outcome was unclear. In January last year education secretary Gavin Williamson voted against continued membership of Erasmus in any

Brexit deal, but then Boris Johnson said there was “no threat”. However not long afterwards, Williamson said the Department for Education would develop its own “alternative arrangements” to Erasmus+, just in case. By the date of the Brexit deal on December 24, the UK had lost membership of the Erasmus+ scheme, with Johnson saying it was a “tough decision” but the financial cost of remaining was too high.

On the same day, the Turing scheme was announced. Named after the famed computing pioneer, Johnson said the global replacement for Erasmus+ would involve “the best universities” all over the world, immediately prompting queries about whether vocational placements would also be funded as they are under Erasmus+. (The EU once called its vocational programme the Leonardo da Vinci scheme, after that other great inventor, but it was rolled into the rebranded Erasmus+ scheme in 2014.) To clear things up, the government published its updated “International Education Strategy” last month – part of its plan to “strengthen the

UK’s global leadership” – which said the Turing scheme is for learners “in universities, colleges and schools”. About £105 million would fund 35,000 placements anywhere in the world, ranging from two weeks to 12 months, for a year from September 2021.

FE Week can now reveal the separate funding pots for the first time: £35 million for further education, £60 million for universities and £10 million for schools, according to Ecorys, the co-delivery partner with the British Council for the Turing scheme. This roughly equates to about 10,000 further education placements, 20,000 higher education placements and 5,000 school placements, says Jane Racz, director of the scheme at the British Council. And on Wednesday, the Turing Scheme website published a “programme guide” with a few more details. So is the programme good? How can colleges get involved?

First off, the Turing scheme has big boots

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Feature

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CONTINUED

to fill. Unlike some headlines claiming Erasmus+ is “elitist” or “middle-class”, the colleges sector, when asked, had only good news to report. A 2019 survey of 31 colleges carried out by the Association of Colleges found three-quarters gave the programme a full 5 out of 5 score for its benefits to the institution, with only three per cent giving it a 3 and no scores below that. It may be to do with the sizeable proportion of poorer learners on the scheme – one-fifth of vocational placements have gone to disadvantaged students, according to Ecorys. The perception of the programme as only for higher education students is “misleading and exclusionary”, one witness told the House of Lords European Union committee two years ago.

And the positive view among colleges is seen in the numbers, too. In 2020, 57 colleges were awarded funding to send staff and students abroad on placements, up from 28 six years before. Colleges won €25.6 million for those placements, again a huge increase from just €5.2 million in 2014. And that’s just how much colleges successfully pitched for, not how much was available in total. Overall, €39.8 million was available to the UK in 2020 for vocational education placements.



Automotive lecturers from South Devon College at Lycee Saint Gabrielle, France in 2019

It’s this figure that has led the government to say the programme is like-for-like in terms of the Turing scheme’s own £35 million of funding.

“But that doesn’t include staff,” points out Richard Stratford, head of projects and partnerships at South Devon College. Whereas colleges can apply for Erasmus+ placement funding for staff as well as students, the Turing scheme is for students only, with some extra funding to cover staff “accompanying learners abroad for safeguarding purposes”, according to the programme guide. The college usually sends about 40 lecturers on staff placements a year to their partner institutions in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Ireland or France. “They come back buzzing with ideas, absolutely buzzing. That will be a huge loss,” says Stratford.

Jodie Davis, a performing arts lecturer at Dudley College of Technology in the West Midlands, spent one week each in Cyprus, Sweden, Greece and Portugal observing dancing lessons, including in professional dance schools. “We learnt a lot about their different cultural approaches to it, especially the technical training.” Back at home, she trained her students in alternative styles

so they could adapt to an international dance company in future. The experience also “invigorated” her,” she says. “I pushed myself out of my comfort zone again, as a practitioner too.” Since FE lecturers are intended to be industry experts as well as teachers, such placements fit with the ethos of the sector.

As Emma Meredith, international director at the AoC, says, “clearly, Erasmus was being used”. Eighty-five per cent



Students and staff at Lancaster & Morecambe College learning how to cook seafood in Italy

of surveyed colleges were using Erasmus+ for learner placements – but 76 per cent were also using it for staff development. Last year, 1,152 UK staff from further education went on these placements, according to Ecorys. It’s not a huge figure – but for an individual college, the insight potential is not insignificant. Mathew Hayes, international projects lead at Lancaster & Morecambe College, says his principal was hoping to visit top-level apprenticeship provision in both Germany and Denmark, “where apprenticeships are treated on par with degrees”, he says. But such staff trips will no longer be funded.

FE Week interviewed a European Commission official for education policy about the shift. UK further education colleges “could really lose resources to help them thrive,” he said. “Finland, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, the Basque country, these all have really top-notch further education and vocational training, and that’s now more difficult for UK institutions to learn from.”

It’s worsened by the fact the second “strand” of Erasmus+ funding for partnerships and collaborative projects is also not replicated under the Turing scheme. Colleges can currently partner with at least two other institutions across Europe to discuss and pilot new ideas around the curriculum or training, in order to create and disseminate new resources. Lancaster & Morecambe College currently has 11 collaborative projects on the go – one former research project with Cyprus, Poland, Italy, Lithuania and Spain on careers advice produced new resources the college “uses to this day”. Staff have also been involved in Erasmus+ “skills sector partnerships”, set up

Available budget for Turing Scheme 2021-22

Sector	Budget (to the nearest £1m)
Higher education	£60 million
Further and vocational education	£35 million
Schools	£10 million
Total	£105 million

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Feature

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CONTINUED

to identify and tackle emerging skills gaps across Europe, particularly digital skills. Last year, UK colleges won bids worth €2.4 million for this second projects strand.

Crucially, this pot helps pay for Hayes' salary, he says – which in turn allows him to do all the preparation, risk assessments and partnership building for the student placements. "I'm not sure there will be enough money under Turing to pay for my wage and for this office to continue to exist. The role would have to go to a teacher, but they're already stretched as it is. If you haven't done it before, you can't understand how much paperwork there is." He points out the Turing Scheme's global offer is likely to involve even more paperwork, since the placements will be further away and potentially riskier; partnerships will need to be built from scratch; and the lack of reciprocal funding for students to return to the UK, as an offer under Erasmus+, might make it less appealing. "It doesn't look good, in terms of friendship, does it?" Returning students will also need to hurdle the UK's new visa system. Paul Harrison, an external evaluator for Erasmus+, says, "I predict some of these existing partnerships will die, because colleges in other countries won't be able to find the funding to reciprocate."

As if to add insult to injury, the EU Commission confirmed it is soon going to be expanding its vocational education placements to countries around the world – just like Turing, but with staff placements and project work thrown in too.

It all seems quite galling, but colleges remain determined to see what the Turing Scheme can offer them. Meredith at the

AoC makes the good point that the two experienced partners for the UK Erasmus+ programme (the British Council and Ecorys) will be in charge of the new Turing scheme, thereby allowing "continuity of expertise" in the roll-out of the new programme – no randomly contracted, inexperienced private provider at the helm here. Racz at the British Council says that although her organisation cannot "facilitate" new partnerships overseas, colleges unsure where to start can approach the British Council, which has offices all over the world, to "broker conversations".

And there are exciting opportunities. South Devon College is situated in a global geopark, an area of special natural interest, says Stratford. "We've already got some great links with 147 other geoparks in other countries, such as Tanzania, so we're exploring doing something exciting with those through Turing," he says. Similarly, the college will also now be able to fund its A-level learners to go abroad – Erasmus+ is just for vocational placements.

Another piece of encouraging news is that colleges will still have access to ECVET, the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training. This is a benchmarking system that allows learners to have their hours on work placements abroad count towards apprenticeships and qualifications. However, work still needs to

be done about how to make work placement hours count all over the world. Madeleine Rose, director of programme management at Ecorys, says this "isn't in train yet" but "is important and something we need to consider once the scheme is open".

The Turing Scheme will open



Dance training in Portugal for Dudley College staff

for applications this month. According to the programme guide, further education institutions will get €315 per participant in "organisational support" for the first 100 participants, and €180 for groups bigger than that. For travel costs, colleges will receive a fixed amount depending how far away the destination is. So it's €165 for sending learners anywhere between 100km to 499 km away – while visiting Tanzania, for instance, at 11,000 km, would qualify for €905. Learners will also get €135 each to access language resources if they are going away to a non-English-speaking country for more than 19 days.

Thereafter, daily funds will depend on whether the learner (and accompanying staff member) is in a group 1, 2 or 3 destination country, which is ranked according to local living costs. Learners in group 1 countries get €109 a day for two weeks, and €76 a day after that. Those in group 2 countries get €94 a day then €66 a day, and those in group 3 countries get €80 a day and €56 a day after that.

Meanwhile, colleges need to identify the "anticipated points of expenditure" when they will require the funds, and will be paid 80 per cent of costs at these points, with the final 20 per cent once a special report is completed showing all went to plan. College will also need to undergo "financial capacity checks" before their application is accepted.

"I'm open to what the Turing scheme offers as an alternative," concludes Davis, the dance tutor. "I think it will be interesting to see how we can do something a little bit different. But Erasmus was such a valuable scheme for staff too. That is a real shame."



Students and staff from Dudley College on an Erasmus trip

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GRAHAM HASTING-EVANS

Chief executive NOCN, and president British Association of Construction Heads



Speed and scope are now crucial for the skills white paper

There's much that is encouraging in the skills white paper – but we can't wait another decade for the reforms to fully roll out, says Graham Hasting-Evans

The Skills for Jobs white paper is one of the most fundamental initiatives around further education we have seen in the past decade. It builds upon the reforms kicked off by Professor Alison Wolf's review of vocational education in 2011 and the subsequent changes to apprenticeships and vocational and technical qualifications.

There are a lot of good ideas in the white paper and I know people will be keen to get into the detail – where the devil always lies.

I want to touch on the need to ensure further education is properly funded, can continually change to meet fast-paced demand, supports all people across all our communities and enables upskilling. We also need to think about standards and timescales.

Personally, I welcome the direction of the white paper and believe we as a sector need to embrace it, whilst improving on some of the detail. A particularly challenging aspect will be employer involvement in delivering the improved system. Let's turn first to need.

Level 2s are backbone of the workforce

We have a great academic system



and enjoy worldwide recognition for the quality of our education sector and qualifications. Many of our universities are in the global top 100. All this is very positive.

However, the vast majority of people do not go into 'academic' occupations. They go into practical jobs. If our economy is to be highly productive and enable levelling up, we must ensure our FE technical and vocational system is world class.

And this system must support all the occupations in our economy, not just those at level 3 and above.

We know some 11.2 million (30 per cent) of jobs in the economy are at level 2 and below, with essential pathways at entry and level 1. We badly need to upskill this part of the workforce – a significant challenge if we want to improve productivity.

In many important sectors, such as business administration, construction and hospitality, roles at level 2 and below are the backbone of the workforce. In some sectors these roles make up three-quarters of all jobs, and this

is not going to change any time soon.

So, we should be funding training and qualifications for level 2 and below as part of the whole system in order to truly level up.

However, the white paper does not make mention of this – it only commits to funding for level 3 and above. So I recommend the government does commit to continue the funding for entry, level 1 and level 2 for 16-to-19-year-olds, as well as adults who need upskilling in the workforce.

“Technology is changing every three to six months, so skills reform must keep pace”

Internationalisation of standards

In the UK we have disaggregated standards across the various nations. For many occupations we

now have an English, Northern Ireland, Scottish and Welsh occupational standard. This flies in the face of what is happening in the rest of the world.

Elsewhere we see an internationalisation of standards, with many countries now seeing the standard at the WorldSkills competition as the bar to aim for. As we update our skills system we should aim for international standards across the four nations.

Take big steps more quickly

Timescales are also crucial. I appreciate that at the moment we need to focus on the implications of Covid and the challenge of lost learning. But afterwards, we must focus on making the ideas in the white paper a reality as soon as possible.

We must reflect on the fact that our current programme of reforms kicked off ten years ago, and we still have around five years more implementation ahead of us to fully complete the current T Level roll-out. It has taken a long time.

When technology is radically changing every three to six months, skills reform must keep pace. And we must have a system that we can easily and readily update and revise. If we don't we will not succeed. With persistent low productivity, we will lag behind our competitors.

Now is the time to embrace the ideas in the white paper to build a world-class, agile FE system.

DAVID ROBINSON

Director of post-16 and skills, Education Policy Institute



Our research on the ignored 16-to-19 attainment gap is disturbing

In the first study of its kind, the scale of the attainment gap for disadvantaged post-16 learners has been laid bare, writes David Robinson

In comparison to other education age phases, little attention has been given to the role of the 16-to-19 phase in delivering greater social mobility.

One reason for this is that it is very difficult for policymakers to measure the outcomes of disadvantaged students at college and sixth-form level, with students taking such a wide range of qualifications across different ages.

But in a new study – the first of its kind – the Education Policy Institute, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, provides new evidence to fill this space. The results from our exploratory research are deeply concerning.

We find that across all qualifications, disadvantaged college and sixth-form students are the equivalent of three A-level grades behind better-off students, on average. In some parts of the country, this gap is as wide as five grades.

Much of this very large attainment gap can be explained by disadvantaged students' lower performance at secondary school, which is then carried with them into college and sixth form.

We also see that the type of qualifications and the ability of students' peers play a role in the gap.

But it also appears that on top of this, coming from a low socio-economic background itself may be contributing to the 16-to-19 gap.

If we look at poorer students and more affluent students who performed the same at GCSE, we see that disadvantaged students then face a further attainment penalty during college and sixth form – losing out by an extra half a grade. And of course, the pandemic may be widening this gulf.

Learning loss resulting from the pandemic is felt most keenly by disadvantaged young people, as they tend to have poorer access to laptops or a quiet working space, and may be less likely to be doing online face-to-face teaching.

The impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged students' attainment may also go beyond the effects of lost learning. We know that in 2020 those taking technical qualifications such as BTECs did not receive the same boost to their grades as students taking A-levels.

As disadvantaged students are more likely to take vocational

qualifications, they stand to fall further behind as a result of the grading in 2020. And while the government has moved to avoid these mistakes for 2021, it's not yet clear that this will entirely address this new disparity.

Last week, the government did

“Disadvantaged college students are three A-level grades behind better-off students”

reveal it would extend the 16- to 19-tuition fund for an extra year.

This is to be targeted towards supporting students to catch up in English, maths and other vocational and academic subjects.

As soon as these details were released, there were immediate debates as to whether this amount will be enough to make up for the lost learning and to close the

inequalities that emerged during the pandemic.

To add to these concerns, the offer from the Budget has been mixed at best. The greater rollout of traineeships is something we've called for previously. But proposals for greater increases in subsidies for adult apprentices seems at odds with the evidence it is apprenticeships and other employment opportunities for young people that have been disappearing the fastest.

One thing is clear: neither the catch-up plan nor the Budget proposals will do much to close the huge inequalities in 16-to-19 attainment that existed prior to the pandemic.

Taken together with our new findings, it's imperative that urgent action be taken by government. We must go significantly beyond the current catch-up plans.

Before anything else, the government should introduce a student premium for the 16-to-19 phase, as part of its upcoming review of funding.

Given that average funding rates are low in historic terms, the premium should not be at the expense of other students in this phase and should represent a real-terms increase for sixth forms and colleges.

If the government is to realise the potential of the 16-19 phase for improving social mobility, it must get started on closing the attainment gap here at once.



JANE HICKIE

Chief executive,
Association of
Employment and
Learning Providers



The government's delay to Covid tests for students with training providers is disgraceful

We can ask why those on work-based learning routes are constantly discriminated against – but there is no good explanation, writes Jane Hickie

I guess we should be used to it by now. Ever since the pandemic began, hundreds of thousands of apprentices and learners with independent training providers (ITPs) have been at the very back of the queue in terms of receiving government support.

The chancellor has without doubt proved to be an honourable exception on this front but it feels like a constant case of one step forward, and two steps back.

Just when you are hoping that ITPs can go back and do what they do best – that is, look after themselves – a new variant of the virus comes through an airport arrivals hall and you fear the worst. At least the rollout of vaccinations should make a big difference. But in the meantime, my members have another hurdle to jump.

The education secretary wants learners aged 16 to 19 to return to their education settings on Monday. So the government is ensuring that students at schools and colleges will be given lateral flow tests for Covid twice a week if required.

Apprentices and the many young people on traineeships or study programmes in the same age



group with ITPs will not, however, have access to testing in their place of learning until April at the earliest.

Why? We have asked the question many times but to no avail there is no explanation.

After FE Week reported this latest example of unequal treatment, the opposition raised the matter at question time in the House of Lords on Monday. But the minister could only direct these learners to local community testing centres for the next three weeks.

The flaw in the response is that it doesn't recognise the high levels of vulnerable and disadvantaged young people that ITPs support. Many are more susceptible to catching the virus, but will not have easy transport links to take them to test centres.

Before Christmas, ITP learners were not even in the Department for Education's plans for lateral flow or home testing kits, and AELP had to lobby hard for a change. However, it was then

difficult to comprehend why the DfE didn't simply use the same system for schools and colleges by sending kits to the ITP's training centres or somewhere appropriate nearby. In fact, we are still waiting to hear how the distribution will be managed from April.

In the meantime, the government's guidance from March 8 requires that most of a learner's programme hours should take place on site. This is nigh on impossible to do safely if there are no tests available.

“April was meant to be a time of relief”

It is especially frustrating when the Chancellor is using the Budget to inject a further £126 million into traineeships on top of last July's £110 million. Providers are desperate to start young people as soon as possible on the new traineeships but are now having

to delay until April.

April was meant to be the time of relief for providers after months and months of lobbying and debate. They could finally unblock the logjam of learners who have not been able to take their functional skills tests or undergo their end-point assessment which may involve a practical element.

Although the government has now opened the door to teacher assessment for functional skills qualifications (FSQs), it is still insisting that these are a final resort after a test in the workplace or a remote test.

The onus on the provider and employer is to arrange an FSQ test at the workplace and this is another major reason why we need lateral flow tests as a matter of urgency.

Alongside the almost blatant disregard for the wellbeing of ITP learners, we must not forget the safety of provider staff and independent invigilators in all this.

While providers will put other safety measures in place again, the fear of Covid variants spreading will be a serious concern until everyone has been vaccinated.

Ultimately it is totally wrong for the government to be discriminating against the most disadvantaged young people who have chosen the work-based learning route. Their lives matter too.

TOM RICHMOND

Director, EDSK



Sunak's flagship Budget policy risks squeezing out young people

Offering employers incentives regardless of an apprentice's age in the Budget was completely the wrong call, writes Tom Richmond

"Our country's future will be built by the next generation, so it's vital that we harness the talent of young people as we rebuild from the pandemic," said Chancellor Rishi Sunak in November last year, and he was right.

Younger workers aged 16 to 24 have accounted for nearly half of the total fall in employment during the economic slump. Previous recessions have shown it can take years for raised unemployment levels among young people to recede.

On that basis, you might assume that the Chancellor would seek to unashamedly boost the employment prospects of young people. If that is what you were expecting from the Budget, you were in for a bumpy ride.

Make incentive payments permanent

In the heyday of traineeships in 2015-16, they were creating around 24,000 opportunities a year for 16- to 24- year-olds, so they could go on to start an apprenticeship, new job or return to education.

But by 2020, the number of traineeships had fallen by half. So seeing the Treasury invest in traineeships last summer, in the spending review last autumn and now again in the Budget is a long-



overdue but welcome recognition of the potential of this programme.

The additional £126 million to expand traineeships next year – including for the recently introduced employer "incentive payment" of £1,000 – will provide enough funding to support tens of thousands of young people during these difficult times.

Going forward, there is a strong case to make these incentive payments a permanent feature of the traineeships programme in future.

No justification for extra cash for adults

On the other hand, employer incentive payments for apprenticeships are nothing new. That is where we get to the not-so-good news from the Budget.

The incentives for hiring apprentices were first introduced in August and offered employers £2,000 to take on apprentices aged 16 to 24 and £1,500 for apprentices aged 25 and over.

From April to September,

these incentives will become more generous at £3,000 per hire – regardless of the apprentice's age.

That is the wrong call. Incentive payments can help employers build their capacity to support, mentor and supervise younger apprentices. But there is no such justification for throwing money at employers for recruiting adult apprentices.

Indeed, it contradicts existing government policy that requires employers who do not pay the apprenticeship levy to contribute five per cent towards the cost of an adult apprentice's training and assessment.

It is hard to see how offering £3,000 for recruiting adults will do anything other than undermine the interests of young people who desperately want and need their first step on the career ladder – even more so in these turbulent times.

To make matters worse, the deadweight costs of these adult subsidies are likely to be sky high –

wasting tens of millions of pounds. This precious funding could have been put to much better use by increasing the subsidies for young people to, say, £5,000, or even creating new subsidies for hiring disadvantaged young people, such as those with low or no qualifications.

Lack of clarity on different schemes

When sandwiched between traineeships, adult apprenticeships and the new Kickstart scheme, it is not clear how apprenticeships for younger learners are supposed to thrive in 2021. The Budget offered no clarity on how these schemes are supposed to interact with each other.

Yet the potential consequences for the number of apprenticeship opportunities this year are obvious enough.

The overall focus on jobs and employment in this year's Budget was entirely necessary. Attempts to generate new education and training opportunities as the economy begins to emerge from the national lockdown should therefore be commended.

Nonetheless, the Chancellor was correct to say that we must harness the talents of young people as we rebuild our economy in the coming months.

It is a great shame that one of his flagship policies might achieve precisely the opposite.

ANDY NORMAN

Research analyst,
Centre for
Progressive Policy



The Budget should have tackled the deep structural problems with apprenticeships

Until Sunak realises there's a preference in the apprenticeship system for existing employees over young people, his Budget announcements won't help, writes Andy Norman

Today's Budget is all about repairing the damage wrought by the coronavirus pandemic, particularly for young people. The measures announced by the Chancellor attempt to kickstart demand for apprenticeships. Yet they fail to acknowledge that the pandemic has simply exacerbated the more fundamental problems that have plagued the apprenticeship system for years now. Until Rishi Sunak undertakes structural reform, his efforts are doomed to fail.

Bonus payment too small

Apprenticeship starts fell by 45 per cent during the first lockdown. They recovered slightly between August and October, but they were still 28 per cent lower than the previous year.

The young have been hardest hit. During the first wave of the pandemic, apprenticeship starts for under-19s fell by 68 per cent, compared to 39 per cent for over-25s.

Low-level apprenticeships have also borne the brunt of the damage, which is particularly concerning because they offer the first step on to the skills ladder. Without them, many low-skilled people will be cut adrift.

While level 2 apprenticeship starts plummeted by more than

60 per cent between March and July, starts at level 4 and above fell by just three per cent. Meanwhile, between August and October, starts at level 4 and above actually grew by about 300.

To try to repair the damage, over the summer the government announced an apprenticeship bonus payment. Starting from last August, employers have received £2,000 for taking on an apprentice aged 16 to 24 and £1,500 for those over 25.

However, as Centre for Progressive Policy (CPP) pointed out at the time, the bonus payment was too small to make a significant impact, amounting to just 13 per cent of the first year of a young apprentice's wages.

This has since been proven correct. Between August and January, there were just 25,400 starts under the scheme, only a quarter of the 100,000 budgeted for by the Treasury.

Apprenticeships going to existing employees

But there is more going on here than meets the eye. Looking more

closely at the data, employers claimed the bonus payment for only 18 per cent of starts between August and November. Why would employers not claim incentive payments for more than four-fifths of starts?

The reason seems to be that the bonus cannot be claimed for existing employees. This strongly suggests that currently the vast majority of apprenticeship opportunities are going to people already working at the organisation.

It is unsurprising that the Chancellor has used this Budget to announce an increase in the bonus scheme, with apprentices of all ages now coming with a £3,000 bonus payment from government. Will this be enough to shift the dial on apprenticeships?

If employers were not willing to take on a young apprentice with a 13 per cent wage subsidy, it seems unlikely that they will now that the subsidy is closer to 20 per cent.

That's why CPP has argued that the subsidy needs to be 50 per cent of wages.

But increasing the bonus

payment can only get us so far. The preference for existing employees and the exclusion of young people speaks to the more longstanding problems with the apprenticeship system.

Before the pandemic, system reforms – principally the apprenticeship levy – shifted opportunities away from young people looking to take the first step on to the skills ladder and towards highly qualified existing employees. The pandemic has simply exacerbated this trend.

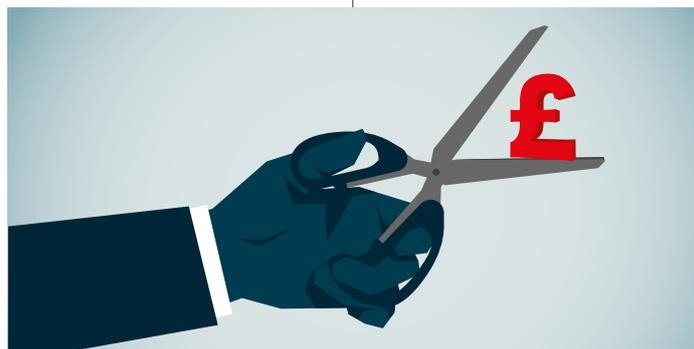
Ringfence levy funds

So as well as a larger apprenticeship bonus, we need much more fundamental reform of the levy.

Some have argued that reform should give employers more flexibility over how they spend their levy funds, but the opposite is true. Levy rules must reflect that apprenticeships should be a gateway into skilled employment for young people and adults stuck in low-skilled work.

This means ringfencing a proportion of levy funds to be spent only on young people at lower qualification levels. It also means heavily restricting the share of funds that can be used on existing employees.

The Chancellor was right to recognise that the apprenticeship system is in trouble. However, the policies Sunak has announced amount to little more than a slightly larger sticking plaster. Actually what the patient really needs is comprehensive surgery.



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READER'S REPLY

'Pyrrhic victory': functional skills learners CAN receive teacher-assessed grades

Many functional skills awarding bodies are/will be trying to push remote invigilation or proctoring but at additional cost which is not an acceptable solution when providers and clients are suffering from Covid-related issues. Assessed grades are the right way forward.

Geoff Godsell, website

Colleges and FE providers to reopen in full from March 8, PM announces

It sounds good that schools and colleges will be opening soon. At the same time, it sounds ridiculous to open just for two weeks and close down for Easter.

IB, website

There appears confusion over whether students on close-contact courses can return on March 8... vocational massage courses?

Eileen Baron, website

Delay to Covid-19 testing for providers branded 'madness'

Madness indeed. DfE seriously needs to provide parity for our learners and providers. Their safety can't be compromised, with restrictions soon set to ease. This would be a national scandal if it were schools or colleges.

Rebecca, Twitter

REPLY OF THE WEEK

'Pyrrhic victory': functional skills learners CAN receive teacher-assessed grades



Functional skills students are being treated with disdain. Whilst their GCSE counterparts are not required to take exams and stand to get inflated grades due to the lack of robust guidance regarding teacher assessment, FS students will be taking exams with no dispensation, as if the pandemic never happened. They have suffered exactly the same disruption to learning as GCSE students, not to mention the same mental health challenges, yet none of this will be taken into account. Could someone please explain to me how this is fair?

Gideon Eames, website

Come on Department for Education. ITPs need the same reassurance and support as schools and colleges. Very unfair on learners and staff, especially in a close-contact training centre!

Helen, Twitter

Profile: David Gallagher

This is a great read and a fantastic interview with my friend David Gallagher. Well done FE Week for this spotlight on a key leader in the sector whose contribution to the national debate on the skills agenda is clear, direct and strategic

Paul Eeles, Twitter

Love how refreshingly honest and earnest this piece is about the motivators behind the CEO of NCFE. Quite a journey, and captured perfectly by Jess Staufenberg

Kim Pattison, Twitter

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Movers & Shakers

Your weekly guide to who's new and who's leaving



Natalie Taylor

Director of employability, Learning Curve Group

Start date March 2021

Previous Job

CEO, Antrec Limited

Interesting fact

She developed her passion for vocational training at the age of 18 when she left college before her exams to start her own floristry business



Wayne Wright

Deputy principal for quality and excellence, Lambeth College

Start date March 2021

Previous job

Educational consultant, self-employed

Interesting fact

When he was ten years old, he won a city-wide children's general knowledge quiz and was interviewed on Sheffield television



Peter Estlin

Chair, Association of Apprentices

Start date February 2021

Concurrent job

Chair, FutureDotNow

Interesting fact

He climbed Mount Kenya when he was 26

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